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Forces of Displacement: Current Successes and Challenges in Addressing Refugee Situations in Africa

Thank you ORR for this opportunity to address a subject that is still so important after four decades during which many African countries have attained independence. Freedom, as it was beheld then, came after, at times, bitter struggle and loss of many lives and property. But the aspirations of that generation of nationalists were by and large attained.

Forty years and more since then, Africa appears to be in the throes of profound deprivation characterized by little or no social and economic evolution that benefit a significant number of Africans. In that same period, and despite the remarkable fact that many of the new leaders were themselves refugees during the struggle for independence, the number of refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR in Africa is one of the highest in the world.

The number of these persons including refugees, the internally displaced, and asylum seekers are currently estimated at just over four million out of a global population of 17 million. While these figures are impressive, the actual number of forcibly displaced by conflicts and persecution is much higher. Some have placed this number closer to 15 million. UNHCR assistance to four million out of a needy 15 million displays a huge gap. This fact should be of concern.

What are the forces of forced population displacement in Africa? I am sure everyone in this room can give a listing of the forces at play. These range from drought and famine, degradation of the environment, socio-economic tensions, political and ethnic instability and general insecurity within regions. But what do these reasons tell us about the dynamics, complexity and interplay of forces that make individual conflicts result in refugee and other forced population movements.

Sometimes, during the 27 years of service to refugees as a UNHCR staff member, I stumble upon explanations that appear to capture this complex picture. Perhaps one of the best of such explanations is found in the excellent book of Deborah Scroggins entitled “Emma’s War”. Scroggins created an analogy of layers of historical, social, anthropological and economic forces to create a surface map of political conflict... to explain the genesis of the Sudanese dilemma. As she puts it, we start with the first layer of historical tension between:

- “The northern government versus the southern population; and
- Under that, another under layer of religious conflict, Muslim versus Christian and animists; and
- Under that a map of all the sectarian divisions within those categories; and

- Under that, a layer of ethnic divisions –Arab and Arabized versus Nilotic and Equatorian-all of them containing a multitude of clan and tribal subdivisions; and
- Under that, a layer of linguistic conflicts; and
- Under that a layer of economic divisions-the more peopled north with fewer natural resources versus the poorer south with its rich mineral and fossil fuel deposits; and
- Under that a layer of colonial divisions; and
- Under that a layer of racial divisions related to slavery, and so on and so on “

She concluded: “It would become clear that the war (Sudanese civil war), like the country, was not one but many -- a violent ecosystem capable of generating endless new things to fight about without ever shedding any of the old ones”.

A very gloomy picture of the Sudan -- and it is appropriate that today we talk of the Sudan, as we are about to experience, in the Dafur region of Western Sudan and in Eastern Chad, a humanitarian disaster unprecedented even by African standard. But the picture painted here is not uniquely a Sudanese one. You can substitute it for the Great Lakes Region, for Zimbabwe, for Somalia, for Nigeria, and it more or less fits.

Paradoxically, despite the complexity of addressing the challenges posed, we are beginning to see, on the optimistic side, clear patterns of positive changes for conflict prevention and conflict resolution generally in Africa. As the political terrain in Africa continues to democratize and develop, creating sustainable political solutions, the root causes of displacement and conflicts are eased and the implementation of durable solutions for refugees is beginning to appear feasible.

So what has changed to explain these positive developments? I cannot claim that I know all the answers, but certainly the end of the Cold War has facilitated the solution of many protracted refugee situations. And although the post- Cold War period have generated new reasons for forced population displacement, it is generally believed that relatively faster solutions can be found to resolve these conflicts, given international resolve and the luck that solutions coincide with the strategic interests of the powerful donor countries.

On these reasons we also need to acknowledge the efforts being made by the Africans themselves after 40years of disrupted progress to insist, through the democratic process and developing democratic institutions and practices, that their elected leaders have the qualities that will make a significant difference to the installation of peace, stability and security without which foundation there cannot be sustainable social and economic progress. These are changes still in their very fragile infancy and need to be nurtured very carefully. But birth has been given to hope and a future for many African countries.

Against these new positive developments, UNHCR has a role to play alongside our partners in the humanitarian theater. The resolution of many of the protracted

conflicts in Africa could, over the next few years, lead to the voluntary repatriation of up to two million refugees from several African countries and the return of several million more internally displaced persons.

A number of repatriation operations are already underway. In Angola, Eritrea, Sierra Leone and parts of Somalia, hundred of thousands have gone home over the past few years.

Other durable solution operations are at different stages of the planning phase, depending on political developments and the status of the peace process in each case. In Liberia, where the development of peacekeepers and humanitarian personnel throughout the country is underway and where the disarmament and demobilization process is about to start, some spontaneous returns of refugees have already started from Sierra Leone.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, planning is underway for the voluntary repatriation of refugees from neighboring countries to parts of the country where peace and stability have reached sustainable levels.

In Burundi, UNHCR and its partners have already facilitated the return of several thousands of refugees over the past months.

However, many challenges lie ahead. Peace processes must be strongly supported at all levels, especially by countries that can make a difference. Efforts must be made to ensure the effectiveness of programs aimed at the disarmament, demobilization reintegration and rehabilitation of former combatants, including youths. Comprehensive strategies should be developed to support peace building and reconciliation efforts from the grassroots level right up to the highest political level. Humanitarian agencies must be given adequate resources to help refugee and IDPs return home in safety and dignity. And the social and economic aspects of post conflict reconstruction must be addressed in a timely and coordinate way. This will include programs to enhance self-reliance, to improve education, health, and other basic services, to counter discrimination and to promote gender awareness and equality.

Africa, in conclusion, is at a crossroad of history. There are opportunities for progress for Africa and Africans and they deserve a break from hundreds of years of history of deprivation, oppression, wars and poverty and all that goes with profound social dislocation. Yet the Deborah Scroggins spectre of underlying negative forces continue to haunt the continent, more dangerous is the increasing insensitivity born of our collective incapacity to absorb the tragedies of the recent past: "a million dead in Somalia, another million slaughtered in Rwanda; up to three million killed in Congo; hundreds of thousands killed in smaller wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, Eritrea and Ethiopia. How many are dead and will die in Dafur and Eastern Chad? Not to mention 17 million so far dead of AIDS. All of this has taken place in the last 15 years.

Even Africans have a blurred vision visualizing the gravity of the situation. The rest of the world appears to have shut its eyes.

Let me conclude by once more thanking ORR as an important part of a Government that is providing example of how resettlement can become a measure to provide safety to refugee groups unable to integrate in Africa. UNHCR is committed to playing its part in making referrals for refugee resettlement and this year, as my colleagues Larry Yungk would have informed you this morning, we are set to reach the target of 21,000 referrals.

We also advocate, at every opportunity, that resettlement, which with voluntary repatriation is important as a durable solution, will become part of the responsibility of numerous States; a responsibility that is shared and not only transferred onto other more willing States. The fruit of these efforts to find sustainable durable solutions for many African refugees, as our High Commissioner stated recently, “reflect a special reality: the end of long years in exile and the start of a new life with renewed hope for the future”.